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ABSTRACT

For 40 years the primary objectives of U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf have been to assure access by the industrialized nations to the region's oil and to prevent those resources from falling under the control of the Soviet Union or any other hostile power. The recent events in Iran, the Iran-Iraq War and its aftermath, the maneuvering of a powerful post-war Iraq, increasing Soviet activism, and the proliferation of chemical weapons and ballistic missiles call for an examination of what political, economic, and military elements will best serve future U.S. policy and interests in the region. Few conference participants saw any prospects of a genuine peace in the region in the near future, and most agreed there was little threat of Soviet intervention. Participants agreed that a fundamental reassessment of U.S. policy in the region was necessary. They identified several key issues but disagreed on potential outcomes. The major issues for U.S. policy consideration include: (1) the need to shift U.S. attention from deterring the Soviets toward a focus on forces in the Persian Gulf; (2) an exploration with the United Nations to diffuse the Shatt al-Arab River as a trigger for renewed conflict; (3) a reevaluation of U.S. military presence in the region based on the perception of a decreased Soviet threat; (4) an assessment of the opportunities for active U.S. diplomacy in the Gulf; (5) an examination of the potential for developing multilateral regimes for the purpose of promoting rapprochement among the Gulf states; and (6) a determination of what efforts can be made to find a regime to limit both chemical and advanced conventional weapons proliferation. The report could be used as background information for teachers or by secondary level students. (JB)

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US Policy in the Persian Gulf: New Beginnings

Vantage Conference 1989

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Policymakers and experts focused on recent developments in the Persian Gulf and discussed others in an effort to formulate goals and strategies for US policy.

Editor's Note:

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini died in the interim period between the end of the conference and publication of this rapporteur's report.

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US Policy in the Persian Gulf: New Beginnings

Report of a Vantage Conference

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Executive Summary

For forty years the primary objectives of US policy in the Persian Gulf have been to assure access by the industrialized nations to the region's oil and to prevent those resources from falling under the control of the Soviet Union or any other hostile power. The recent events in Iran, the Iran-Iraq war and its aftermath, the maneuvering of a powerful post-war Iraq, increasing Soviet activism, and the proliferation of chemical weapons and ballistic missiles call for an examination of what political, economic, and military elements will best serve future US policy and interests in the region.

Is this a period of new political extremism in Iran? How likely is a succession struggle and what will it mean for political stability? Iran is suspected of involvement in the bombing of Pan Am flight #103, Ayatollah Khomeini has issued a death sentence against author Salman Rushdie for blasphemy, Saudi diplomats have been assassinated, and Khomeini's designated successor, Ayatollah Hoseyn Ali Montezari, was forced to resign. Participants agreed that analysts in the West had been too quick to assume the Iranian moderates were ascendant. The radicals hold the upper hand at the moment, but participants generally regarded recent events as an effort to revive the revolution in a nation devastated by war rather than as clear evidence of renewed extremism.

Most predicted a protracted struggle for succession when Khomeini dies, but there was little consensus on the outcome. The need to define an economic course for a nation with profound economic weaknesses

will have an impact, but Iran has shown a remarkable capacity to hang on and avoid dealing with economic problems. This uncertainty about internal events in Iran argues strongly against attempting to base US policy on speculation about what will happen in Iran in the years ahead.

The Iran-Iraq cease-fire has evolved into a no war, no peace situation in which neither side has significantly demobilized; and peace talks have stalled with major disagreements over Iraqi-occupied territory and control of the Shatt al-Arab River with its enormous symbolic importance. Most agreed that UN Resolution 598 would be the best starting point toward eventual settlement and that the major powers have preferred to let the United Nations command center stage in the negotiations—especially given the absence of anything the major powers can do to promote a settlement.

Few saw any prospects of a genuine peace in the near future. The immense losses suffered by both sides make it difficult for either to compromise and neither appears ready to deal with basic political issues—such as the threat each regime poses to the other—that will be a necessary part of any settlement.

The Iraqis emerged from the war in a relatively favorable position as the preeminent power in the region. They have formed the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) with Egypt, Jordan, and North Yemen which is widely viewed as a counterpart to the Saudi-dominated Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Despite their strong position, the war ironically underscored their basic strategic vulnerability with limited access to the gulf. As one participant noted, "Iraq has huge lungs but a tiny windpipe." Presently, they are demanding long-term military lease rights on Kuwait's Bubiyan Island which commands the entrance to Iraq's only operable port at Umm Qasr. These and other events led some to wonder whether Iraq was moderating or would return to the "bad old days." Most agreed that Iraq's neighbors have reason for concern and that, like Iran, too little is known about Iraq to base any US policy decisions on assumptions about future Iraqi behavior.

The Soviets seem determined to play a more active role in the Middle East, but what are their objectives? Do they represent a threat to US interests? The Soviets have shown continuity in pursuing the objectives of maintaining relations with Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Iran; encouraging Arab and Islamic anti-American elements; and selling arms for foreign currency and influence. At the same time, the Soviets have been seeking a more active and visible diplomatic presence throughout the Middle East. They seem to understand that Third World development depends on social and economic factors outside their control. They also recognize that military involvement in regional conflicts could undermine stable relations with the West.

Most participants agreed that there was little threat of Soviet intervention in the region. They did not agree whether there was a basis for US-Soviet cooperation in the area but did feel that discussing regional issues was of value, if only to avoid misunderstandings. Although the majority of participants believed that the United States should not continue to view Middle East politics through an East-West lens, it proved very difficult to get beyond that perspective and consider positive steps to increase cooperation.

There was major concern over implications of the continuing chemical weapons proliferation as Iran and other Middle East states move to acquire them. Simultaneously, the spread of ballistic missiles throughout the region raises the specter of long-range delivery capabilities for chemical and other weapons, and the interest in other sophisticated weapons has not diminished. Participants saw few short-term opportunities to curb the production or use of chemical weapons and were equally pessimistic about stopping conventional weapons.

Another disagreement came over whether arms sales provide suppliers with influence. Some argued that arms sales remain crucial to maintaining influence in the region, while others countered that the addition of new weapons suppliers like China and Brazil is reducing the leverage any supplier can hope to gain.

Participants agreed that a fundamental reassessment of US policy in the region was necessary in order to respond to recent events and beyond. They identified several key issues to be addressed but disagreed on potential outcomes. Major issues for US policy consideration include:

—the need to shift US attention from deterring the Soviets toward a focus on forces in the gulf;

—an exploration with the United Nations to diffuse the Shatt al-Arab River as a trigger for renewed conflict;

—a reevaluation of US military presence in the region based on the perception of a decreased Soviet threat;

—an assessment of the opportunities for active US diplomacy in the gulf, with the possibility that the United States should turn its effort to more pressing concerns in South Asia or the Arab-Israeli conflict;

—an examination of the potential for developing multilateral regimes, to settle things like boundary disputes, for the purpose of promoting rapprochement among the gulf states;

—and, a determination of what efforts can be made to find a regime to limit both chemical and advanced conventional weapons proliferation.

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Jo Husbands, Rapporteur

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US Policy in the Persian Gulf: New Beginnings

Over the past forty years, US interests in the Persian Gulf have been simple and consistent: (1) to assure access by the industrialized nations to the oil resources of the region; and (2) to prevent those resources from falling under the control of the Soviet Union or any other hostile power. The aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war, recent events in Iran, the proliferation of advanced conventional weapons – including ballistic missiles – as well as growing chemical weapons capabilities, continuing maneuvering and tensions between Iraq and its neighbors, and increasing Soviet diplomatic activism make an assessment of the options for US policy in the Persian Gulf especially timely. In the face of these changes and challenges, what are the elements of a political, economic, and military strategy that will best serve US interests during the Bush administration and beyond?

The rapporteur prepared this report following the conference. It contains her interpretation of the proceedings and is not merely a descriptive, chronological account. Participants neither reviewed nor approved the report. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

Iran: The State of the Revolution

When the Iran-Iraq war ended, the "moderates" in Iran, such as parliamentary leader Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani and President Mohammed Ali Khamenei, had every reason to believe their day had come. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's health appeared to be failing, the moderates occupied key positions of power, and influential ayatollahs increasingly engaged in open criticism of the Islamic revolution and its accomplishments. Western analysts spoke confidently of the "institutionalization" of the Iranian revolution, as shown by Ayatollah Hoseyn Ali Montezari's position as designated successor to Khomeini.

Both the moderates and the analysts were confounded. On Valentine's Day 1989, Khomeini issued a death sentence against author Salman Rushdie for blasphemy – the second such pronouncement in two weeks. This was followed six weeks later by the forced resignation of Montezari as Khomeini's successor. Prior to the Rushdie incident, three Saudi diplomats were assassinated in Turkey, Pakistan, and Thailand, and there has been strong suspicion of Iranian involvement in the bombing of Pan Am flight #103 in December 1988.

Is this a period of new political extremism in Iranian policy? What are the prospects for a succession struggle and what does this mean for political stability in Iran?

Participants generally agreed that Western analysts had been too quick to consider the Iranian succession settled and the moderates ascendant. The fundamental fragility of the revolution was a recurring theme in participants' comments. The radicals hold the upper hand at the moment, but participants generally regarded the latest events as an attempt to revive revolutionary energy in a devastated nation rather than as a clear sign of renewed extremism. One person compared the situation to the last desperate days of the Cultural Revolution in China, while another termed it "the last belch of the revolution."

The role of the clerics provoked considerable discussion and disagreement. Several pointed to mounting evidence over the past two years that the clerics' power was on the wane. Added to this are recent indications of strong divisions among the leading clerics –"they are eating themselves up" – and signs of growing anticlerical sentiments among the people. Several cautioned that anticleri-

calism is not new in Iran, but most agreed that, nonetheless, the sources and motives are now different.

The implications of these developments for post-Khomeini Iran aroused the greatest interest. Leading clerics have shown increasing concern that Khomeini and his regime have lost religious legitimacy. None of the key clerics in power is truly a theologian, one participant argued, so the theocratic view that Khomeini represented is likely to die with him. Who would preserve the theocracy and for whom? Even if the structures of Islamic government and the powerful symbolism of Islam remain, this argument runs, Iran after Khomeini will need to seek new sources of legitimacy. Several participants cautioned that this would never mean a return to prerevolutionary conditions; in that sense, the revolution has in fact been institutionalized.

Most predicted a protracted struggle for succession when Khomeini dies, and no one would predict the outcome with confidence. The Revolutionary Guards may be the single strongest institution, with a nationwide base of power, but their loyalties are problematic. Several suggested that a collegial leadership, dominated by the clerics, would be the likely outcome, but others regarded this as simply not a Persian solution.

Whatever government emerges will face monumental economic problems. The revolutionary upheavals, followed by the devastation of the Iran-Iraq war, have left the Iranian economy in shambles. There is still a fundamental struggle to define an economic ideology for the country. The profound economic weaknesses and the need for foreign investment to rebuild, some suggested, would be forces for caution and moderation. Others noted that the same comments had been made about Khomeini ten years ago and that Iran had shown a remarkable capacity to hang on and avoid dealing with its economic problems. One participant pointed out that oil exports had continued quite smoothly throughout the war, providing a steady source of revenue.

Finally, several participants noted that the United States simply knows relatively little about internal events in Iran, particularly the strength of various contenders for power. The profound uncertainty, most agreed, argued strongly against attempting to base US policy on assumptions of what will happen in Iran over the next few years.

The Cease-Fire Talks: Is the War Over?

The UN-sponsored cease-fire that brought an end to the Iran-Iraq war had held for more than seven months, but peace talks were making no progress. The key point of disagreement was the Shatt al-Arab River, over which both nations claim sovereignty. Iraq also held a substantial chunk of Iranian territory that it captured in the final days of the war, which was another major source of tension. There had been several major incidents, primarily artillery duels begun by Iran as a way of showing its displeasure over the continued occupation of its territory. Neither side had as yet demobilized a significant number of troops, although neither was considered likely to undertake a major offensive, if only because their war-weary populations would not support renewed fighting.

What leverage, if any, is available to the international community to facilitate the peace process? Can the United States live comfortably with a situation of no war, no peace?

In discussing the Shatt, participants all agreed to its immense symbolic importance, domestically and regionally, but disagreed about its practical significance. The 1975 Algiers agreement, which divided the river on the basis of the thalweg* principle, would be a logical basis for any settlement. Iraq, however, had formally rejected the 1975 accord. Several participants described Iraq as obsessed with access to the gulf, to the point of being willing to see the Shatt remain closed rather than cede sovereignty to Iran. Others pointed out Iraqi interest in alternative routes, such as a canal to Basra or an oil terminal island in the gulf, and development of oil pipelines across Saudi Arabia and Turkey as factors that may make the Shatt less significant in the future. Such alternatives might also ease one of the ironic outcomes of the war – although Iraq emerged in a relatively strong position, the war reinforced Iraqi perceptions of its fundamental strategic vulnerability.

On the question of a broader settlement of the war, few participants saw any prospects of a genuine peace in the near future. The immense losses that each side suffered in the war make it difficult for either to agree to any settlement that appears to give advantage to the other. Neither nation appears ready to deal with the political issues – such as the threat each regime poses to the other – that would have to be part of a real settlement. Iran in particular, given

*Centerline of the navigable channel.

its domestic situation, would have great difficulty accepting a compromise position.

The participants agreed that UN Resolution 598 would be the necessary starting point for any eventual settlement, although at least one participant was sharply critical of its provisions. Currently the major powers, including the United States and the Soviet Union, prefer to let the United Nations occupy center stage. Several also argued that there was little, if anything, that the major powers could do to promote a settlement, and some argued that seeking to intervene for the sake of appearing to do something might cause real damage. This provoked some sharp comments about whether the major powers were deliberately encouraging stalemate, perhaps in an attempt to further weaken Iran. Some participants cautioned that the United States should be concerned for its image in the gulf, particularly the belief that it was pleased with the war and the destruction Iran suffered.

Few, however, were willing to endorse the current no peace, no war situation as the best outcome. Participants cited the continued proliferation of chemical weapons and the probable influx of conventional weapons as the two sides seek to rebuild their military forces as two clearly undesirable consequences of allowing the stalemate to continue. Yet most felt that, in the absence of the dramatic events that occur with unsettling frequency in the region, the inherently unstable status quo was likely to continue for the time being, if only because there were few strong pressures from any source, domestic or international, to seek a real settlement.

Iraq and Its Neighbors: What Happens Next?

At the last OPEC meeting, Iran and Iraq accepted parity in oil production. Both seemed to be observing the agreement thus far, and the feared postwar collapse of oil prices had not occurred. Iraq had recently joined together with Egypt, Jordan, and North Yemen in a new coalition called the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC). This was widely regarded as a "northern" Arab counterpart to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which consists of Saudi Arabia and its smaller neighbors. On another front, the recent visit of the Kuwaiti crown prince/foreign minister to Baghdad ostentatiously failed to produce a border agreement, amid reports that Iraq is demanding a long-term lease and military presence on Bubiyan Island, which commands the entrance to Iraq's only operable port, Umm Qasr. There were also reports that Iraqi troops carried out a brief incur-

sion into Kuwaiti territory last year, and Kuwait was making a great show of its attachment to Bubiyan Island.

Should the ACC be regarded as positive evidence of Iraq's growing relationship with the "moderate" Arab camp? Should it be seen a potential rival to the GCC for influence in the gulf? Is the ambitious and aggressive Iraq of the prerevolutionary-war era gone? Or is Iraq simply on its best behavior and likely to revert at some point to the "bad old days"?

At the outset several participants commented that the United States knows very little about Iraq, so that any assessment of its actions contains large amounts of speculation. Nevertheless, they agreed that Iraq had emerged from the war in a relatively favorable position -- holding Iranian territory, with its military forces largely intact, and able to avoid domestic repercussions since the cease-fire came while its forces were on the offensive. Even the large number of Iraqi prisoners-of-war held by Iran is not a major problem, since their capture has left them somewhat suspect, and Iraq is thus in no hurry to have them home again. For the moment, Iraq is the prerevolutionary-eminent power in the gulf, and this is a source of considerable worry for its neighbors.

Whatever Iraq's current strengths, to the Iraqis the war only underscored their basic vulnerability. They are more conscious than ever of their limited access to the gulf. As one participant noted, "Iraq has huge lungs but a tiny windpipe." At present, the country is seriously short of cash, and the regime is wary of the disruptions that demobilization could bring. One participant, who had recently visited Iraq, commented that the government was going to great lengths to disguise the effects of the war. Iraq, however, has the necessary means to recover. Iraq's oil pipelines all pass through neighboring moderate states. This led some to argue that Iraq is under strong pressures to maintain a moderate policy. They suggested that one could see signs of moderation even before the outbreak of the war; for example, Iraq had stopped trying to overthrow neighboring regimes. At the same time, however, Saddam Hussein's regime has escalated its involvement in Lebanon and shows no signs of moderating its domestic ruthlessness. Most participants felt that Iraq's gulf neighbors had reason to be concerned, and that, as with Iran, the United States could not confidently base any policy on assumptions about Iraq's future behavior.

Participants generally did not see the ACC as a serious future force in the gulf. The coalition had been hastily assembled, and there appeared to be little long-term commonality of interest among members. Saudi Arabia's primary concern, some suggested, was Yemen's involvement rather than a long-term challenge to the GCC. The primary significance of the ACC, several argued, was the evidence it provides of gulf states' determination to develop their own defense industries – an "industrial *jihad*," as one participant termed it. The immediate prospects for independent capabilities were considered uncertain, but over time these countries seem likely to develop significant military production of at least some important weaponry.

There was far less agreement over the long-term prospects for oil production, although most of the arguments were about the timing rather than the probability of future oil shocks and supply disruptions. Two-thirds of the world's reserves are in the gulf – over the next twenty years Iraq is expected to emerge as the second largest producer after Saudi Arabia – and only gulf production is capable of responding to growing international demand for oil. Some participants argued that oil would continue flowing no matter what political upheavals shook the region because it was in the gulf states' own interest to maintain supplies, and others suggested that new technologies and increased conservation in the Third World would lessen energy dependence. Most participants, however, felt that concern with maintaining oil supplies and access would remain key to US policy in the gulf.

The New Diplomatic Activism of the Soviet Union

Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard A. Shevardnadze's recent swing through the Middle East, and the correspondence between Mikhail Gorbachev and Ayatollah Khomeini, drew public attention to Soviet determination to play an active role in Middle East politics. Soviet relations with Iran were now more amicable that at any time in recent memory, and the prospect of Soviet diplomatic relations with both Saudi Arabia and Israel was becoming more likely. The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan may have been a humiliation, but the Soviet Union was using it as a springboard to better relations with the regional states.

What are Soviet objectives in the gulf over the next four to eight years? To what extent is the Soviet courtship of Iran related to its interest in preserving a position in Afghanistan? Are Soviet

regional political gains symptomatic of an eroding US position? Do they represent a threat to US interests?

Participants pointed to three elements of continuity in Soviet policy toward the Middle East. First, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Iran remain the most important states, and Soviet policy is designed to maintain relations with them. Second, the Soviet Union can be expected to continue encouraging the anti-US elements of Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism. Finally, arms sales remain a key policy tool, both to earn foreign currency and to cultivate relationships.

At the same time, however, the Soviets have been seeking a more active and visible diplomatic presence throughout the Middle East. This appears to reflect a changed view of bipolar relations. For example, in the early 1980s the Soviets tried to align themselves with Islamic fundamentalism, but they are now very worried by its spread and implications. They are particularly concerned that regional conflicts could damage their larger interests, namely stable US-Soviet relations and strong ties to Western Europe. The Soviets appear to be increasingly convinced that social and economic force dominate Third World development and that they therefore cannot have much impact on events. Finally, the Soviets today apparently view a presence in Afghanistan and South Asia as less crucial to their security, a clear shift from the Brezhnev era.

The participants did not agree on the importance of potential access to oil in Soviet diplomacy. The Soviet Union now exports oil, but its reserves are not extensive, and since Chernobyl their nuclear power plants, on which they rely heavily, are being systematically closed for safety reasons. Preventing Soviet control or significant influence over Middle East oil supplies has been a cornerstone of postwar US policy, but most participants believed that the threat of an actual Soviet intervention was remote and that political factors were far more important in their diplomacy today.

Some participants suggested that although they have increased contact, the Soviets find Iran as perplexing and unpredictable as Americans do. There was sharp disagreement about the pro-Soviet tilt and tendencies of some of the Iranian mullahs. Some suggested that the Iranians and the Soviets have strong common short-term interests in Afghanistan, where both seek to prevent the victory of the Pakistani-backed *mujahadeen*. Any Soviet-Iranian cooperation is likely to remain shallow given their historical animosity and the

Soviets' desire to maintain close ties with Iraq. One participant insisted, however, that it could be perilous to underestimate potential Soviet influence in Iran.

Several participants argued strongly that the United States must stop defining its Middle East policy in East-West terms and pay more attention to regional issues and forces. Participants did not agree on whether there was a basis for US-Soviet cooperation, for example in seeking a settlement to the Iran-Iraq war, but most saw the value of discussing regional issues at least to avoid misunderstandings. In response to a question about developing common "rules of the game," several participants responded that seeking general principles had caused problems in the past and that one was better off concentrating on concrete cases. Some participants raised the question of whether it was realistic, given the deep-rooted anticommunism that is an enduring factor in US domestic politics, to think US leaders could acquiesce in an increased Soviet role and presence in the gulf, much less actively seek greater cooperation. As a specific example, would the United States countenance or encourage Soviet participation in a UN peacekeeping force to supervise the terms of an Iran-Iraq settlement? Even if the Soviet Union were no longer the driving force behind US policy toward the Middle East, could the United States actively seek cooperation? In the end, although most agreed that the United States should not continue to view Middle East politics through an East-West lens, it proved very difficult to get beyond that perspective and consider positive steps to increase that cooperation.

New Weapons -- New Problems?

Iraq's heavy use of chemical weapons at the end of the war may have shattered the tacit international barriers to their widespread use. Attention has turned to the efforts of Syria, Libya, Iran, and other Middle East states to acquire these weapons of terror. At the same time, the spread of ballistic missiles throughout the region raises the spectre of long-range delivery capabilities for chemical and other weapons. The fall in oil prices slowed sales of advanced conventional weapons to the region as a whole, but there is little sign that the appetite for sophisticated military hardware has diminished. If anything, the growing interest in developing their own military industries suggests that states in the region are determined to ensure steady, independent sources of supply. Is the proliferation of chemical weapons inevitable? What effect do these weapons have on the military and political balance in the region?

What are the implications of the continuing proliferation of sophisticated conventional weapons? Of production capabilities? Is there any basis for an arms control regime, either among suppliers or recipients?

Participants were generally pessimistic about the prospects for limiting the spread of chemical weapons in the region. "The cat is out of the bag," one commented. Many saw limitations, if they were achieved, coming either as part of a larger regional political settlement or as one piece of an international agreement to limit chemical weapons. Someone suggested that perhaps deterrence would develop as chemical capabilities spread, but most were pessimistic about such inhibitions developing in the near future. When asked about the role of the Soviets, one participant commented that Western Europeans had been the primary suppliers of chemical weapons production facilities. Even if the Soviets have ties to the Iraqis and Libyans, it made little sense to look to them to supply the pressure on these countries to give up their capabilities.

The proliferation of conventional weapons provoked a lively discussion. Contrary to expectations, during its early days the Iran-Iraq war did not diminish interest in sophisticated weaponry. By and large, both states had found ways to use their advanced systems, although they needed to adapt imported military doctrines to their own situations. One key lesson – the advantages of being able to strike an enemy in ways against which he cannot defend – had increased interest in ballistic missiles. The importance of being able to diversify sources of weapons had opened markets for many new suppliers and increased interest in developing national defense industries. As a result, although the Soviets remain significant suppliers – and a primary source of ballistic missiles – the US share has diminished as traditional suppliers like Britain and France increased their market share and new suppliers such as Brazil and China entered the scene. For most of these suppliers, exports are the only way to keep their military industries viable, so the prospects for limits on conventional arms transfers appear slim. One exception, the Missile Technology Control Regime which was set up among most major Western suppliers in 1987, has had some success. Some participants, however, thought its long-term impact would be minor.

The key source of disagreement was whether arms sales provide the supplier with influence over recipients. Several participants argued strongly that arms sales were a key source of influence and

that the United States had suffered in recent years by restricting its sales to states such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Others argued that "influence" was diffuse and that, in any event, the proliferation of suppliers was reducing the leverage any supplier could hope to gain through arms sales.

The Road Ahead: US Regional Interests and Security Presence

Participants were challenged to take a more positive approach in thinking about US policy toward the gulf. Where would they like the United States and the region to be in four years? In responding, participants first agreed that a fundamental reassessment of US policy was necessary in order to respond to recent events in the region and beyond. They identified several key issues that such a review must address, although they did not always agree on what the outcome of a review should be.

- The most important element of reassessment for many is the need to shift from a concern with deterring or thwarting the Soviet Union to paying greater attention to forces in the gulf itself.

- The Shatt al-Arab River is the potential trigger for a new conflict. The United States should explore with the United Nations means of starting the process of clearing the river as the necessary first step to a political settlement.

- The decreased perception of a Soviet threat calls for a fundamental reevaluation of the US military presence in the region. Is it necessary to have a carrier battle group on station in the Gulf of Oman? Would regular naval visits by a task force from the Indian Ocean be sufficient – and less provocative? Can the United States consider returning to a seven-ship presence in the gulf? Should US military rules of engagement be reconsidered now that the war is over?

- Where should the United States place the bulk of its energy in policy toward the Middle East? If the current situation in the gulf offers little opportunity for active US diplomacy – and little immediate threat to US interests – then the United States should give greater attention to South Asia and to the Arab-Israeli conflict, where initiative and leadership are needed.

- Are Iranian-Arab tensions inevitable and how might the United States, perhaps working through the United Nations, promote rapprochement among the gulf states? For example, the region is a mass of overlapping territorial claims; there are virtually no defined and accepted national boundaries. Is it possible to develop multilateral regimes to deal with potential conflicts?

- Even though current prospects appear dim, continued effort must be given to seeking a regime to control chemical weapons. Efforts to find ways to limit the spread of advanced conventional weaponry, particularly such destabilizing technologies as ballistic missiles, should also be explored. This needs to be balanced, however, by considerations for the political relationships that arms supplies may help to build or sustain.

Conclusion

The events in the Persian Gulf over the last several months offer cautionary tales for Western analysts too quick to predict what will happen in the region. The United States must be prepared to live with a degree of uncertainty and the knowledge that most challenges to stability arise from political developments over which the United States has little control. Nevertheless, broader developments in the international environment – especially the changes taking place in the Soviet Union – create the need to reassess basic assumptions that have guided US policy for over forty years. There are chances for creative reevaluation that could result in a better balance of US interests and capabilities.

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